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Multiculturalism, Diversity, and Religious Tolerance in Modern Britain and the BBC's *Merlin*

DAVID C. TOLLERTON

Setting the BBC's *Merlin* in an ahistorical, mythical realm allows the series' creators to reflect key elements of modern rather than medieval British society. As a result, the series explores issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and tolerance in a way which resonates with twenty-first-century viewers. (DCT)

> Contained within this great kingdom is a rich variety of people with a range of different beliefs...one day you will learn, Arthur, one day you will understand just how much they've done for you.[1]

Spoken by court physician Gaius to the young Arthur, these words from the fourth season of the BBC's *Merlin* reflect a concern with tolerance and diversity that recurs throughout this particular small-screen adaptation of the Arthurian legend. While Gaius is of course talking to Arthur about Camelot, given the extent to which such themes tie into the social context of UK viewers, the 'great kingdom' could equally refer to an increasingly diverse modern Britain—a society characterized by ongoing debates about identity, freedom of expression, and social cohesion. 'Every period and every society chooses its Arthur,' observes Norris Lacy, and I contend that the BBC's *Merlin* follows this pattern by specifically resonating with contemporary Britain's difficult attempts to come to terms with its own diversity.[2] Through its relationships with ethnicity, historicity, and ideas of religious tolerance, *Merlin* is a series that consistently promotes the acceptance of difference. And while it might be possible to view the insertion of such modern idealism into Arthurian legend with a certain scholarly cynicism, I will ultimately take the view that, faced with some of the alternative ideological routes that a contemporary depiction of Camelot could take, *Merlin*'s multiculturalism should on balance be seen in a positive light.

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ETHNICITY AND *MERLIN*

Any discussion of *Merlin*'s relationship with ideas of diversity and tolerance must ultimately focus at length on some of the story arcs that run through the program. But before addressing these I wish to consider issues that arise from the casting of *Merlin*, especially when compared to certain other screen representations of Arthurian legend and the fantasy genre more broadly.

The Camelot of *Merlin* both is and is not a multiethnic society. It is in the sense that several key characters are played by mixed-ethnicity and (in the context of British demographics) ethnic-minority actors. Alongside Guinevere (played by Angel Coulby), examples include the knight Sir Elyan (Adetomiwa Edun) and the villain Helios (Terence Maynard). Yet Camelot is not a multiethnic society in the sense that 'race' is not a concept especially familiar to the world of *Merlin*. Within the program's internal dynamics there is no obvious sense of foreignness attached to the family background of these characters nor any notion that the realm is any more or less ethnically diverse than in the past. Ethnicity is something that, put simply, the citizens of Camelot do not seem to think about.

Such casting of *Merlin* has nonetheless drawn occasional comment among audiences and in the media. Writing in *The Guardian*, for example, Ben Child notes that some viewers 'take exception to the number of black actors in the cast' based on their perception that this does not properly reflect the program's loosely medieval framing.[3] The diversity of *Merlin*'s Camelot, so the complaint runs, inappropriately mirrors contemporary British society rather than its pre-modern setting, and a look through the BBC's official viewer feedback website does indeed show intermittent discussions about the correctness of these casting decisions.[4] In Child's own view, such concerns have little merit given the genre we are dealing with. 'Frankly,' he writes, 'this is a story that took a sharp turn into the bounds of rampant impossibility a long, long time before it was decided to use a mixed-race cast.'[5] And in the context of a tale featuring, on a weekly basis, fantastical sorcery and all manner of mystical beasts, he is fair in giving such complaints little credence. Yet it is worth dwelling upon this point a little further in comparison to other screen representations of Arthurian legend and the fantasy genre.

Issues of ethnicity and casting in depictions of pre-modern fantasy were notably brought to the fore during the release of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in the early 2000s. The extent to which the trilogy's heroes are played by white actors attracted attention in both media and academic circles, with John Yatt, for example, commenting that 'there was something about watching a bunch of pale faces setting off into the east to hack some guys with dark faces into little bits that made me feel a bit queasy.'[6] Comparing

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the task faced by the makers of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Merlin* is useful in that it quickly highlights their differing situations with regard to written sources. Jackson was confronted with the task of working with a singular and well-known source that described its characters' physical appearances in clear terms. Regardless of whether it would have been right or wrong to have done so, casting non-white actors in heroic roles would have involved actively resisting an element of Tolkien's original trilogy. As Sue Kim notes, it is ultimately the case that '[t]he films generally draw their racial and color-coding from the novels.'[7] The makers of *Merlin* were given a freer hand in that they do not explicitly claim to base their series on the writings of one specific author. Any association *Merlin* may have with older Arthurian texts is not made as clear to viewers as the association between *The Lord of the Rings* films and Tolkien's works. It is revealing, for example, that media condemnations of the trilogy's treatment of ethnicity had a tendency to move quickly from criticising Jackson's films to scrutinising Tolkien's writings.[8] Such a shift of attention from screen to source text would be far trickier with *Merlin*, because it pitches itself as an adaptation of Arthurian legend rather than a specific body of Arthurian literature. So when making casting decisions, the creators of *Merlin* did not have their hands tied by close association with any specific text.

More important, however, is the extent to which the makers of this series gave themselves greater freedom of interpretation by creating an especially de-historicized version of the legend. The world of *Merlin* is particularly able to reflect modern Britain by being extremely vague about its historical setting. At this point it is useful to draw on comparisons with the American Starz's series *Camelot*. *Merlin* and *Camelot* are a natural choice for comparison for several reasons: they have had overlapping broadcast periods (*Merlin* 2008–2012, *Camelot* 2011); both frame their retellings around a young Arthur slowly establishing the Camelot more familiar in legend; and the two productions even have an overlap of personnel involved in their inceptions (Chris Chibnall, a key creator of Starz's *Camelot* was also involved in the early scripts for *Merlin*).[9] Yet when it comes to issues of historical setting, they make very different decisions.

Camelot is very definitely meant to be set in a particular era of Britain's past. Clear references are made throughout the program to the land's post-Roman context and the influence of Christianity. Comments on the DVD's production documentary also gesture toward the idea that *Camelot* has a concrete historical setting. Chibnall remarks, 'The point of doing *Camelot* was to really think about the story behind the myth that we all know. What would it actually be like to live through some of these mythical stories?'[10] On a more practical level the costume designer Joan Bergin discusses some of the difficulties she faced in a way that inadvertently highlights the extent to which a measure of historical authenticity was an aspiration for the

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production: 'There are not many recordings of what anybody wore then, so it's a combination of as much as you can [know] about the period, then an odd grasping or feeling toward how we will interpret it.'[11] The makers of *Camelot* may be aware that setting their series in a particular era of Britain's past presents production difficulties, but the important point to note here is that they did at least set about their task with the idea that their representation of Arthurian legend is set in a specific time and place.

Merlin is very different in this regard. It is, as its opening credits proclaim, set 'in a land of myth and a time of magic.' No references are made to Roman history or Christianity, and even its setting in pre-modern Britain is decidedly vague. The name 'Britain' is never used, and the alternative 'Albion' (frequently mentioned by the Great Dragon) is, for the general public, such an unfamiliar way of referring to the British Isles that audiences could easily believe *Merlin* has no direct connection to a historical Britain. The non-historical nature of the program is a point clearly acknowledged by its makers. The director James Hawes reflects,

> We're very conscious that if you take Arthurian legend you could choose anywhere from about the sixth into the fourteenth or fifteenth century. So what we've done is not try to choose a specific era. We're building a world that feels real within the legend and it borrows from that Dark Ages, Medieval period.[12]

As part of the same production documentary, the actor Anthony Head (who plays Uther) is even blunter regarding the non-historicity of *Merlin*:

> We all have this bizarre feeling that the legend of Arthur is history...[but] it is a story that can be messed around with and you can put a new spin on it. Bottom line is: it's all myth, it's legend. None of it's real.[13]

With *Merlin*, it would seem, there was little sense of trying to uncover 'the story behind the myth' as Chibnall describes attempting to do with *Camelot*. The land inhabited by the characters of *Merlin* is instead a fantastical and mythological realm that exists largely outside of history.

The varied attitudes toward historicity in *Merlin* and *Camelot* lead in turn to quite differing approaches to issues of ethnicity. *Camelot* features one non-white character given notable screen-time and dialogue: Vivian (played by Chipo Chung), the servant of Morgan. It is significant that upon her very first appearance it is deemed necessary to clarify to the viewer how it came to be that she is present in *Camelot*'s historical context. She explains that 'the Romans brought my family here as slaves hundreds of years ago. I was told that when the empire fell we stayed.'[14] Not only is Vivian's family background presented as having a certain foreignness, her present appearance is provided with a discernable degree of 'otherness' through her facial tattoos and unusual clothing (we might incidentally reflect that this otherness is actually slightly surprising given the 'hundreds of years' her family has lived in Britain). Vivian

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is, in other words, on some level foreign in a way that, in the BBC's *Merlin*, Guinevere, Sir Elyan, or Helios simply are not. As noted above, the society of *Merlin* displays little discernible awareness of ethnic difference.

It would seem that by de-historicizing the Arthurian legend *Merlin* is better able to reflect the multiethnic nature of modern Britain. I should stress here that I am not proposing that the makers of *Merlin* cast non-white actors to 'make a statement.' The idea that their casting was somehow tokenistic lacks evidence. My suspicion is rather that, when constructing the cast of *Merlin*, its creators brought to the task a mode of thinking about Arthurian legend that meant—whether consciously or not—they neither felt any impediment to creating a world that mirrored modern Britain's ethnic diversity, nor felt any need to construct back stories of 'foreignness' around characters played by mixed-ethnicity or ethnic minority actors.

In this sense the approach taken by the makers of *Merlin* appears to mirror the ethos of the BBC's official Diversity Strategy. The aim, the current strategy states, is to produce 'programming which reflects modern Britain accurately and authentically.'[15] Although it is not clear that *Merlin*'s creators had such a strategy consciously in mind, it is noteworthy that they work under the remit of an organization that promotes television which, in the absence of good reason not to, should ideally reflect the ethnically diverse character of contemporary British society. By de-historicizing the setting of *Merlin* and without constraints set by prescriptive source material, it seems *Merlin* does indeed lack any good reason for its casting not to mirror the social context of its creators.

UTHER VS. MULTICULTURALISM

The discussion above has focused on one element of *Merlin*'s mode of production. However, to consider the relationship between the series and the diversity of modern Britain a more sustained look at some of the program's central story arcs is required. One key narrative to focus on is Uther's 'war against magic,' an aspect of *Merlin*'s framing that is fundamental to many of the program's plotlines and character developments. It is a conflict that links with notions of religious persecution since those shown to suffer at Uther's hands are often Druids or those associated with 'the old religion.' As I will discuss below, tensions regarding diversity and religious tolerance in contemporary Britain also frequently develop out of debates about the practices of religious minorities. However, before considering this point further it is useful to introduce more fully the 'war on magic' depicted in *Merlin*.

Uther, we are informed from the outset, has outlawed all forms of magic in the lands under his control. In his very first appearance he is seen presiding over the execution of a sorcerer. Delivering the verdict, he reflects, 'I pride

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myself as a fair and just king. But for the crime of sorcery there is but one sentence I can pass [i.e. death]' (I.1). Yet the only vocal response he receives in this scene is the critical voice of an old woman in the gathered crowd: 'There is only one evil in this land, and it is not magic. It is you, with your hatred and your ignorance' (I.1). Such condemnations of Uther's policy are widespread in *Merlin*. Later in the same season, for example, Morgana tells him, 'A king is wise and just. You are neither. You rule only with the sword... You are a tyrant!' (I.12). The following dialogue between Gaius and Merlin similarly reflects the way in which some in Camelot are shown, in varying degrees, to doubt the wisdom of Uther's attitude to magic:

> Gaius: It is Uther's job to protect the kingdom. Most of his methods are right. Sometimes he goes too far.
> Merlin: Really? You mean like executing anyone who even passes a sorcerer on the street?
> Gaius: Yes. Despite Uther's failings he has brought peace and prosperity to this kingdom.
> Merlin: But at what cost? At the cost of women and children, fathers and sons? (I.12).

Yet as Anthony Head (the actor playing Uther) notes, 'He is not just your two-dimensional, peevish baddie.'[16] Uther is not without positive attributes—he is shown, for example, very clearly to love his son (and even dies while protecting Arthur from an assassin in the fourth season, IV.3). His suspicions of magic are not entirely unfounded, as characters morally corrupted by the power of sorcery appear on a regular basis. Yet the viewer is nonetheless left in little doubt that Uther's policy is profoundly lacking in wisdom. This is because while there are many villains associated with magic, numerous sympathetic characters also use sorcery, the most obvious example being Merlin himself.

A sense that Uther's war on magic has resonance with modern British society has been occasionally alluded to in media reviews. Writing in *The Guardian*, Will Hodgkinson reflects that 'the thrust of the story is shaped by basic modern fears: mysterious and untameable forces that threaten the safety, stability and, most of all, familiarity of life inside Camelot—a metaphor for England itself.'[17] To draw this idea more fully into focus, it is worth introducing some of the debates concerning religious diversity and social cohesion that have frequently appeared within public discourse in contemporary Britain.

A useful entry point into this discussion is consideration of the disputed term 'multiculturalism.' Multiculturalism—the notion that cultural differences between groups should be tolerated, even celebrated—is an idea that has come under increasing scrutiny over the last decade. In February 2011 Prime Minister David Cameron delivered a controversial speech denouncing multiculturalism's damage to social cohesion.[18] He complained that

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> Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We've failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We've even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values.[19]

Multiculturalism, Cameron suggests, has allowed the development of a fragmented society in which some groups act in a manner that is undesirable within a modern Western state. But evidence that this topic is both sensitive and contested can be seen in the manner in which, only one month later, the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, gave another speech notably attempting to nuance Cameron's take on the issue. Highlighting the slippery nature of 'multiculturalism' as a term, he suggested that

> We have to be clear what we mean here. Where multiculturalism is held to mean more segregation, other communities leading parallel lives, it is clearly wrong. For me, multiculturalism has to be seen as a process by which people respect and communicate with each other, rather than build walls between each other. Welcoming diversity but resisting division: that's the kind of multiculturalism of an open, confident society.[20]

In Clegg's view, 'multiculturalism' is not problematic per se, but rather there are varyingly helpful and unhelpful understandings of the term.

Such public debates about the meaning of 'multiculturalism' and the relative values of diversity and social integration are not new. As the British sociologist Tariq Modood has observed, unease about multiculturalism has been on the political agenda since the beginning of the new century.[21] Indeed, as long ago as 2002, the then-Home Secretary, David Blunkett, publicly warned of the dangers of 'an unbridled multiculturalism which privileges difference over community cohesion.'[22]

A sense that, over the last decade, ideas about cohesion and tolerance of diversity have been in flux has been furthered by certain legislative changes and court cases. One notable development, for example, was the passing of the Racial and Religious Hatred Act in 2006. The Act was aimed at ensuring the rights of religious minorities previously left unprotected by older blasphemy legislation and discrimination laws. Yet it proved controversial among those concerned that free expression (in this instance the freedom to criticise or mock religion) would be hindered.[23] This is in fact a debate that runs all the way back to 2001 given that the 2006 Act was merely the final chapter in a lengthy sequence of attempted legislative reforms.[24]

While the controversy surrounding the 2006 Act involved commentators voicing disquiet at the idea that the protection of religious minorities might hinder free expression, there were at the same time debates regarding the rights of such communities to their own free expression. One especially contested

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issue concerned Islamic dress. The long lead-up to and eventual enactment of a ban on the public wearing of full-face veils in France (in 2011) led to a degree of soul-searching about the comparative nature of British attitudes on this topic. For the most part it has been deemed that, as the Immigration Minister Damian Greene put it in 2010, 'telling people what they can and can't wear, if they're just walking down the street, is a rather un-British thing to do.'[25] The tense fault-line between tolerance and integration had nonetheless already been tested during a lengthy and much-publicized sequence of court cases involving Shabina Begum, a young Muslim woman whose commitments to religious dress clashed with her school's dress code. The complexities of the legal debate need not be repeated here at length, though suffice it to say that in this instance it was deemed that the school had treated Begum fairly when demanding that she adhere to their norms.[26]

I have introduced these varied controversies regarding social cohesion, tolerance and free expression at some length in an effort to highlight the particularly fraught nature of twenty-first-century debate on these issues in the UK. Britain is a far more diverse nation than it was in the years immediately following the Second World War, and the tensions that result from society having to come to terms with this diversity have in recent years made themselves especially felt in political and media discourse.

It is easy to ask, of course, 'What does any of this have to do with the fantasy world of *Merlin*?' While wishing to resist the idea that *Merlin* is a completely straightforward attempt at political commentary, I propose that the broad framing of its approach to Arthurian legend bears the marks of a modern British context. The writers of *Merlin* bring to their treatment of the tradition concerns that resonate specifically with the ongoing social debates introduced above.

Uther's war on magic represents the perils of indiscriminately suppressing diversity and free expression in the name of peace and stability. A rough equivalence can be established between the Druids of *Merlin* and the Muslim community in contemporary Britain. Both are sometimes viewed with suspicion as a group that may upset social norms and cohesion.

In *Merlin*, some who practice sorcery are shown to be morally questionable and others largely free from blame, but under Uther's rule all are placed, without distinction, outside social acceptability. The problematic nature of this policy is presented to viewers from very early in the series, but a more sustained treatment of the topic is also seen in the evolution of Arthur's thinking. The actor playing Arthur, Bradley James, notes in the first season production documentary that his character is set on a course of greater flexibility than Uther's: 'As Arthur grows up, I think he's becoming more aware of the weaknesses of Uther, perhaps specifically his lack of ability to

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sympathize on both sides of a story.'[27] In the following dialogue, taken from the first season, we see the differing instincts depicted in father and son:

> Arthur: The Druid was only in Camelot to collect supplies. He meant no harm. Is it really necessary to execute him?
> Uther: Absolutely necessary. Those who use magic cannot be tolerated.
> Arthur: The Druids are a peaceful people.
> Uther: Given the chance they would return magic to the kingdom. They preach peace but conspire against me. We cannot appear weak.
> Arthur: Showing mercy can be a sign of strength.
> Uther: Our enemies will not see it that way. We have a responsibility to protect this kingdom (I.8).

Here Arthur proposes a more compassionate and tolerant model of rule in comparison to Uther's stark emphasis upon social order. The difference between them is such that several characters, most notably Merlin, place considerable faith in the notion that Arthur's future rule as king will be more nuanced. As the Great Dragon states to Merlin, 'You, like I, must hope that Arthur will bring a new age, an age where the likes of you and I are respected' (III.11).

Such a vision is left, for the viewer, frustratingly just beyond reach by virtue of the fact that the Arthur of this series has been given a rather stuttering journey toward tolerance. At one point in the second season he asks, 'What if my father's attitude toward magic is wrong?...Perhaps it's not as simple as he would have us believe...Surely not everyone who practices magic can be evil?' (II.8). Yet later in the same episode he reflects, 'I had become confused. It is once again clear to me that those who practice magic are evil and dangerous' (II.8). A similar scenario is repeated in the fourth season. Here Arthur promises a sorcerer (in fact Merlin in disguise) that 'when [he is] king, things will be different. [Sorcerers] won't have to live in fear' (IV.3). Again, however, circumstances in the episode cause him to conclude, 'My father spent twenty years fighting magic. To think that I knew better. I was so arrogant...It is pure evil. I'll never lose sight of that again' (IV.3). The fourth season does nonetheless ultimately gesture towards a more accepting future. In a later episode significantly titled 'A Herald of a New Age,' Arthur (now king) declares that the persecution of Druids will cease. He states, 'From this day forth, the Druid people will be treated with the respect they deserve. I give you my word. I am truly sorry for what has happened to you' (IV.10). With *Merlin* heading (at the time of writing) for a fifth season, it is likely that Arthur's evolution will continue, and it seems that some manner of a socially tolerant Camelot is likely to feature as part of the program's resolution.

A brief comparison with Starz's *Camelot* usefully highlights the extent to which *Merlin* is a version of Arthurian legend especially focused on such

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issues. In *Camelot* it is hard to find a parallel concern with topics of diversity, religious tolerance and social cohesion. Certainly the depiction of magic is very different, for in the world of *Camelot* sorcery is an overwhelmingly negative phenomenon. Not only does Morgan experience dark side-effects to the use of magic (plagued, as she is, by physical illness), Merlin also appears to fear it. He remarks that he 'loathes these powers' (I.6), and in the one episode during which he extensively uses magic his actions are tinged with heavy moral ambiguity (I.4). In fact, one oddity of comparing the two series is the manner in which Uther's fears about the corrupting power of magic in the BBC's *Merlin* would be reasonably appropriate if transplanted to the world of Starz's *Camelot*. Yet all this shows, of course, is that the two productions took quite differing lines of approach to the topic of magic and its place in society.

In *Merlin*, by following Arthur's gradual emergence from the shadow of Uther's policies, viewers are able to contemplate social issues that notably mirror those faced by modern Britain. *Merlin* is, when all is said and done, a version of Arthurian legend in which multiculturalist values can be detected behind several of the long-running story arcs. Returning to the words of Gaius that began this essay, both Arthur and the audience are slowly taught to appreciate the wisdom of his advice: 'Contained within this great kingdom is a rich variety of people with a range of different beliefs...one day you will understand just how much they've done for you' (IV.7).

MERLIN AS PROPAGANDA?

To date, academic responses to *Merlin* have been scarce. One exception to this, however, is a 2010 publication in the US-based *Journal of Leadership Education*. In the article Laura Oliver and Kae Reynolds propose that *Merlin* could be used to educate school children about principles of leadership. Using the first season episode 'The Moment of Truth,' they produce a draft handout that teachers could use to highlight instances of admirable leadership qualities such as 'empathy,' 'awareness,' and 'foresight.'[28] Taking their discussion in a slightly different direction, we might ask, 'To what extent should *Merlin* be seen as a program that educates British audiences about tolerating diversity?' Framed more provocatively, one might even ask, 'Does the series amount to multiculturalist propaganda?' There are certainly those who may choose to view *Merlin* suspiciously in just such terms. Conservative Member of Parliament Aidan Burley publically described the London 2012 Olympic opening ceremony as 'leftie multicultural crap,' and those who share his views may condemn *Merlin*'s approach to multiculturalism as well.[29]

One potential response to questions about *Merlin*'s multiculturalist agenda is to suggest that the series should probably not be described as 'propaganda' given that there is no evidence that its makers had a clear educative vision in mind. It seems likely that many of the program's themes and values simply

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reflect the concerns of British society and have absorbed the social outlook of the BBC. As noted above in reference to its Diversity Strategy, the BBC is an organization that officially steers firmly away from attempting to convey some manner of uniform British identity. It should be of little surprise that the liberal values of the BBC find their way into the Arthurian story created under its supervision.

A second line of response to the idea that *Merlin* may represent a form of multiculturalist propaganda is simply to ask, 'Would it really matter if it does?' Certainly it would not be the only recent depiction of the medieval to preach tolerance in the modern world. A far more direct example is Ridley Scott's 2005 crusader epic *Kingdom of Heaven*. As numerous critics observed, it is a film 'all about the present' (specifically the conflicts in and with the modern Middle East).[30] What nonetheless divided these commentators was the degree to which it is acceptable to manipulate historical evidence in service of a story that presses for an acceptance of diversity in an unmistakably contemporary political context. Amin Maalouf, for example, suggested that '[i]t does not do any good to distort history, even if you are distorting it in a good way.'[31] Regardless of whether Maalouf's complaint is or is not valid in the context of *Kingdom of Heaven*, we should observe that the rules are a little different with *Merlin*. *Merlin* cannot meaningfully be described as 'distorting history' due to its mythical foundations. It consequently has a freer hand to gesture toward modern concerns and make ethical judgements on issues of diversity and society.

This aspect of *Merlin* bears comparisons to the depictions of sexuality in the US series *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Although commentators ultimately disagree about the extent to which the program should be seen as 'progressive and hopeful for feminist and queer scholars,' it is clear that attempts to assess its sexual politics in terms of fidelity to a concrete ancient setting are liable to end in absurdity.[32] Like *Merlin*, the setting of *Xena* is so firmly mythical that when speaking to modern cultural concerns it cannot be credibly accused of misrepresenting a specific period of history.

With regard to *Merlin* specifically, an important additional observation is that surely no interpretation of Arthurian legend can entirely remove itself from making moral judgements that are based partially on the context from which it originates. As Jane Gilbert notes, 'No single idea of the "good" governs all Arthurian works;' instead, they 'dialogue with the historical moments in which they were—and still are—produced and consumed.'[33] A further complication to this, however, is that even singular 'historical moments' are not ideologically monolithic. In any one society a variety of competing ideologies will often be present. And given the malleability of Arthurian legend, Nickolas Haydock remarks that 'Arthur is capable of incarnating almost any desire—romantic, rationalist, or racist; nationalistic,

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nostalgic, or new age; fundamentalist, fascist, or futuristic.'[34] Thus in twenty-first-century Britain it is possible to imagine an array of ethical angles taken on the legend. It would be viable, for example, to craft versions that speak to British, English, Scottish, or Welsh nationalisms. It would be easily possible to create a Camelot that nostalgically harks back to an imagined cultural uniformity of the past. Or, as I have been proposing takes place in *Merlin*, it is feasible to construct a take on Arthurian legend that attempts to reflect modern British diversity of the present and gestures (naively or not) to a more tolerant society of the future. Given some of the choices on the table, I am personally fairly happy that this last option was taken.

In all this I should of course be wary of over-selling *Merlin*'s credentials as a work of political commentary. Certainly it does not tackle the complex social realities of contemporary Britain in an especially thorough manner. It is, first and foremost, a piece of family entertainment. Yet it is an adaptation of Arthurian legend that, whether consciously intending to or not, especially reflects some of the worries and hopes of a modern Britain learning to live with its own altered composition. As noted above, Lacy has remarked that 'Every period and every society chooses its Arthur.'[35] For Britain's most prominent broadcast network, the BBC, the Arthur chosen is one that hesitantly reaches for a more tolerant future.

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NOTES

1 'The Secret Sharer,' *Merlin*, season 4, episode 7 (Shine, DVD, 2009). All subsequent references to this series will be cited by season and episode number.

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